



Social Studies Strategies: How to Develop Concepts

What:

Concept development is a strategy to help students to form a general mental understanding or construct (either an image or a model) from examples of a cluster of information or particular category.

Why:

Concepts are the basic tools of thinking and inquiry in social studies. Unless students understand what a concept is they will be unable to understand and categorize facts and move toward generalizations.

How:

Concepts are the categories we use to cluster information. Concepts organize specific information under one label. They are the building blocks and links between facts and generalizations. To understand a generalization, students first must understand its component concepts. For example, in order to understand the generalization, “People in communities are interdependent,” students must know the meaning of the two concepts of community and interdependence.

Concepts can be grouped into two general types: concrete and defined. Concrete concepts are those that students can see (e.g., river, mountain, clothing, shelter, family, government, etc.). Concrete concepts have properties or attributes that students can observe and are often formed by sensory experience. Defined concepts are concepts that are abstract and not directly observable (e.g., democracy, region, citizenship, reform, revolution, justice, nationalism, capitalism, etc.). Since defined concepts have meanings that are not readily observed, they must have precise definitions based on a comparative analysis of several examples. Concrete concepts are the easiest to teach because they are based on observations and sensory experiences.

The teaching of defined concepts is more difficult and requires a series of vicarious learning experiences that help develop the meaning of abstract concepts. Research in the teaching of concepts has identified the following steps that teachers can use in order to teach concepts effectively.

- Identify/brainstorm a set of examples of a particular concept and place them in a logical order.
- Identify and include at least one example that is a “best” example.
- Identify/brainstorm a set of non-examples of the concept.
- Identify the attributes of each example.
- Develop materials or oral instructions with a set of cues, directions, questions, and student activities that will draw attention to the critical attributes, the similarities, and the differences in the examples and non-examples used.
- Have students compare all the examples with the best example. Provide feedback to students on their comparisons.



Social Studies Strategies: How to Develop Concepts

- Focus student attention on the best, strongest, most clear example. What are its critical attributes and characteristics?
- Ask students to develop a definition of the concept or state it for them. The definition should include the category that contains the concept as well as the critical attributes of the concept.
- Place the concept in relation to other student knowledge. Try to attach this new information to existing student knowledge.
- Give students several examples and non-examples to assess whether students understand the concept. Ask students to generate additional examples or to apply the concept to new situations.
- Continue to use the concept when appropriate in new situations.
- The learning of concepts should go beyond verbal definition to include demonstration of understanding by grouping examples, finding new examples, and using the name or label correctly in new situations.

Two teaching strategies for developing concepts are direct instruction and inductive reasoning. Both strategies include attention to the identification of common features (attributes), use of examples and non-examples, classifying or grouping items, naming or labeling the group, and using the concept in ongoing activities.

Direct instruction by the teacher includes the following steps:

- State the concept to be learned or pose a question. (“Today we are going to learn about capitalism” or “What is a peninsula?”).
- Identify the defining characteristics (critical attributes) of the concept. Classify, cluster, or group the common attributes.
- Present the students with several examples of the concept. Have them determine the pattern revealed by the attributes to develop a tentative mental model or generalized mental image of the concept.
- Present some non-examples. The non-examples must violate one or more of the critical attributes of the concepts. Begin with the best non-example.
- Have students develop a definition of the concept based on its category and critical attributes.
- Apply the definition to a wide variety of examples and non-examples. Refine, modify, or adjust the definition of the concept to incorporate further examples identified. Direct instruction can be used with either concrete or defined concepts.

The inductive reasoning approach involves students themselves developing the concept from the facts identified in several examples and non-examples. This approach emphasizes the classifying process and includes the following steps:

- Have students observe and identify items to be grouped (“Which items are shown in this picture?”).
- Identify the features (attributes) used to group each set of items (“Which items seem to belong together? Why?”)
- Name, label, or define each group (“What is a good name for each group?”)



Social Studies Strategies: How to Develop Concepts

- Have students develop a definition of the name (concept) for each group, using the features or attributes for each group.
- Test the definition by applying it to a wide variety of examples and non-examples.
- Refine, modify, or adjust the definition of the concept to incorporate further examples identified. Inductive reasoning works better with concrete concepts.

When:

Provide students with numerous opportunities to move through the structure of knowledge, that is, to move from facts to concepts to generalizations. Continuing attention must be given to concept development, using both direct instruction and inductive reasoning.